

Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim  
Professor of Political Sociology, The American University in Cairo  
Chairman, Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development Studies (Egypt)  
Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Washington DC)  
House Committee on International Relations, May 5, 2005

## **Crafting a Democracy-Based Foreign Policy in the Arab World**

### ***1. Building on new realities***

1.1 The march of events in the Middle East in early 2005 has been dramatic, creating strategic opportunities that exceed anything the region has seen since the Sadat-Rabin years. The prospects for peace and democracy are ripe in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Signs of autocratic regime devolution are also appearing in Libya, Sudan, and Syria. Windows of positive opportunity should be swiftly exploited before autocratic forces retrench and/or extremists jump into center stage to derail the Palestinian-Israeli peace process.

1.2 The US has a unique opportunity to restore its sagging image in the region by observing consistent, credible policies, and by utilizing multi-lateral approaches whenever possible, and staying the course.

1.3 Middle East pundits and Arabists are neither used to the speed of unfolding events nor attuned to the potential positive outcomes. This is reminiscent of their Cold War counterparts, who were taken by surprise as the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet bloc disintegrated without a single shot. No doubt keen on protecting US interests, some are cautioning against leaning too heavily on traditional friends to democratize, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia. (Wisner and Bacon, WP, March 5, 2005). Others advise going gently with old foes, like Syria (Flint Levirett, NYT 'Engage and Empower'.) The challenge is to craft a democracy-based foreign policy that does not waste the extraordinary opportunities emerging now, and yet protects vital interests and restores US credibility in the region.

1.4 For the last 200 years, major transformations in the Middle East have been jolted by an external shock, from Napoleon's 1798 expedition to Egypt to the present moment. While the administration's detractors may deny that recent democratic openings were triggered by US actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, nonetheless these are now facts on the ground and should be forcefully built upon. This memo is confined to the most likely cases of success in the short and medium run.

1.5 There should be clear doctrine in support of democracy, freedom, and human rights throughout the Middle East. Extending US aid, trade, and technology must be conditioned on each country in the region embarking on clear policy of democratization with a timetable or a roadmap that could provide a benchmark on ensuing progress. Dispersal of aid and approval of trade exchange may be timed in accordance with implementation of the suggested sequence of such timetable or roadmap. This is to be specified further in every country case discussed below.

## **2.     *Lebanon***

2.1   The assassination of Rafik Hariri triggered a genuine Lebanese uprising against Syria's nearly 30-year old occupation of the country. There is a rare international consensus in supporting the uprising and expelling Syrian forces and agents from Lebanon. That rare momentum should not be allowed to dissipate.

2.2   While the objective should not be to humiliate the Syrian regime, it should not be allowed time or leeway to circumvent and absorb these pressures. The regime has a long history of just that, since the Taif Agreement of 1989. It was the insistence on implementing UN Resolution 1559 in its entirety before the forthcoming Parliamentary elections, scheduled for May 2005, which ultimately got the twenty-nine year old occupation forces out of Lebanon.

2.3   Face-saving measures for Syria may be accommodated so long as its evacuation of Lebanon is completed in an orderly manner before the elections. A similar evacuation of Syrian intelligence operators, estimated in the thousands, remains to be done and ascertained by independent international observers (such as the UN and/ or the European Union).

2.4   It is commendable that the Shiite leadership in Lebanon has remained restrained. Even when Hezbollah staged its massive demonstration in mid-March, it was orderly and peaceful. Many observers noted that it was the Lebanese flag--not their own black flag-- that was raised during the demonstration. Other observers considered the demonstration a courtesy gesture towards a Syrian ally, akin to a warm and grateful goodbye. This has ensured both the peaceful nature of events and spared any potential sectarian division that could be exploited by the Syrian regime. The Shiite stand is in keeping with a similar wise decision by their counterparts in Iraq, ala Ayatollah Sistani. This should be recognized and commended informally but perhaps not officially, in order not to undermine popular support. As part of that recognition, Hezbollah may be forcefully encouraged to set aside arms and engage in the political process as a Muslim democratic party, akin to the Turkish Justice and Development party and the Iraqi Dawa party.

2.5   A caretaker government to oversee elections should be non-partisan and made up of cross-sectarian, competent technocrats. It is important that they not have blood on their hands or corruption tainting their past. A public figure like Selim el Hoss may be an optimal candidate for prime minister and could form such a cabinet.

2.6   As soon as an internationally monitored election is concluded, the new parliament should consider a motion asking for the resignation of President Lahoud and electing a new president before the end of the year.

### 3. *Syria*

3.1 The Syrian regime is currently at its weakest and most vulnerable position in the last 30 years. Not only was it under mounting pressure in Lebanon, but internally, 200 Syrian intellectuals had also petitioned for withdrawal from Lebanon, and they are now demanding more freedom of expression and respect for human rights. This is symptomatic of an emerging civil society in Syria, one that is also ready to pressure for democratization. The Helsinki Accords of 1975 with the former Soviet bloc should be seriously entertained as a model to reshape Syria's regional role, using both incentives and disincentives.

3.2 The confluence of international, regional, and homegrown pressure will make the Syrian regime ready to engage in Camp David-style peace talks with Israel, i.e. the return of the occupied Golan Heights for full peaceful relations. A more forceful American mediating role can give the regime some assurances that they will reap benefits similar to those gained by Sadat and King Hussein following their respective peace agreements with Israel.

3.3 The US and its western allies should make clear to the Syrians that there is no interest or scheme of toppling the regime so long as it upholds human rights, ends the state of emergency, and engages in gradual power-sharing with other political forces.

3.4 Given Syria's pivotal strategic location in the Arab East (el Mashreq), it should be encouraged to lead in establishing a regional common market that will include Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Iraq, and in due time, Israel.

### 4. *Palestine*

4.1 The momentum created by the recent Palestinian elections, the formation of a democratic government, the Sharm el Sheik meeting, and the mutual confidence-building measures between Israel and the PA should be sustained. As has often happened in the past, extremists on both sides will try to derail the process with violence. The international community should help to prepare the two sides for this eventuality and have a clear course of action, not only to contain but also to isolate the perpetrators, be they Israeli or Palestinian militants.

4.2 The best preventive strategy is rapid progress on the road map. Much of the ground work for implementing it has already been laid in a series of talks and virtual accords, starting with Camp David 2000, Taba, and the civil society initiatives on both sides resulting in the Geneva Accords of 2003. In public opinion polls of Israelis and Palestinians, 54% and 56% respectively supported the substance of the Geneva two-state settlement. This is a crucial moment for the US to take steps to be perceived as even-handed in its role as a mediator, something that has eroded in the past four years.

4.3 As a further confidence-building measure, the US should prevail on the Sharon government not to destroy the Israeli settlements and greenhouses in Gaza and the West Bank, which are to be evacuated during summer 2005. Destroying these settlements serves no purpose, and leaves ill feelings on all sides, e.g. as happened with the Yamite settlement in Sinai during the 1980s. The US should call on third parties and/or graduates of the Maine-based Seeds of

Peace program to make constructive use of these facilities in joint-ventures of the kind suggested by former Prime Minister Shimon Peres in his book, The New Middle East.

4.4 In keeping with the goal of bringing in Islamic forces to the peaceful political process, Hamas and Islamic Jihad should be encouraged through both incentives and disincentives to join in the emerging political order in Palestine. The PA must make room in government for these groups, as well as for the secular democratic movement (Palestinian National Initiative) and others.

## **5. *Iraq***

5.1 The January 3<sup>rd</sup> elections in Iraq gave a tremendous boost to all democracy forces in the Middle East, the carriage of which Iraqi women and men braved out to vote was and still is an inspiration in the region, despite the continued violence and bloodshed.

5.2 The US-led Coalition forces, Iraqi police and army are fighting not only pro-Saddam loyalists and Al-Qaeda recruits, but also several Middle Eastern regimes that have no interest in seeing a stable and democratic Iraq.

5.3 So long as US Coalition forces exist, they will be visible targets of the so-called "Iraqi Resistance." It is advisable for these forces to withdraw from all major urban centers to areas in the north (i.e. Kurdistan) in which they are still perceived as forces of liberation. Alternatively, they may be re-deployed in nearby Kuwait to the south, a country and a people which still remember with gratitude the role of the international coalition in liberating their country fourteen years ago.

5.4 It is advisable to involve as many European, Islamic and Arab countries in the training of the Iraqi military and police forces, even symbolically. The quicker the UN can take over responsibilities for state-building and administrative responsibilities of Iraq, the better. Regardless of what some Americans think of it, the UN flag still carries with it international legitimacy and moral power in the eyes of many around the world, Arabs and Muslims included.

5.5 Although negotiation and bargaining among political stakeholders are part of the democratic political process, the delay in forming the new Iraqi government for three months after the election was portrayed in the Middle East as haggling, greed for power, and inefficient governance. This should be remedied and avoided in the future. Otherwise it will give democracy a bad name.

## **6. *Saudi Arabia***

6.1 Although Saudi Arabia is a significant economic power, thanks to oil and a spiritual regional leader, and the holy shrines on its soil. Yet it is the most conservative, if not outright reactionary, country in the region.

6.2 Political dissidence has been on the increase in recent years, the latest of which are three outspoken critics of the Royal family who have been imprisoned since March 2004 and who are awaiting a trial on a charge of fomenting “sedition” punishable by beheading. It is incumbent on the US and other world democracies to speak out in their defense.

6.3 By the same token, Saudi women should be granted full citizenship rights and have the option to participating in the country’s municipal and hopefully national elections in the foreseeable future. Again, a timetable for political and educational reform should be demanded of the Saudi regime in return for continued economic military and diplomatic cooperation.

6.4 Saudi Shiite citizens have for decades been deprived of some of their basic rights, and this is a time when the Saudi authorities must rectify these discriminatory practices.

## **7. *Egypt***

7.1 It is often said that attempts to democratize the Arab world will not go far without Egypt on board. That is a county that had begun to democratize in 1866, when it issued a constitution and elected its first parliament. Granted this was not yet Westminster-style democracy, but it ushered in the first Arab liberal age which lasted nearly a century.

7.2 When a military junta took over in Egypt in 1952, it triggered a series of similarly autocratic military-based regimes across the region, from Iraq to Mauritania. For the last quarter of a century, emerging civil society forces in Egypt have been waging a determined, peaceful struggle to open up political space. They were not supported by western democracies, enabling the Mubarak regime to dismiss them, or when needed, to imprison or morally assassinate them. Ayman Nour is only the latest case in point.

7.3 The Mubarak regime has deluded the West into believing that political liberalization would open the gates to an Islamist takeover. This may have been understandable in the years immediately following Sadat’s assassination. But to continue arguing the same point now is a cynical use of scare politics that feeds on post 9-11 fears in the United States and Europe.

7.4 The second ploy that the Mubarak regime has skillfully used to ward off significant opening of the system is to argue that economic reform should precede political reform. At the end of 24 years in power, he has little to show for either.

7.5 The third effective ploy has been to point to Egypt’s mediating role in the Arab Israeli peace process. While that role should be commended when it is sincere and produces results, it should in no way be used as a trade-off against internal democratic reforms. After

all, Egypt is a prime beneficiary of the peace process so far, and in that regard is no different than other regional actors. Nor did engagement in the peace process prevent Israel from maintaining its robust democracy, nor prevent Jordan and the Palestinians from forging ahead with their own democratization.

7.6 The recent elections in Iraq and Palestine, as well as a popular uprising in Lebanon and similar defiant demonstrations in Cairo and other cities, seem to have finally embarrassed and compelled Mubarak to make a limited concession. He called upon parliament to amend one article (Article 76) of the constitution to allow for contested presidential elections in the fall. This replaces the 50-year-old practice of referenda endorsing the military's single candidate.

7.7 This is a welcome step, but not enough. Without amending at least two other articles of the constitution – Article 77 to end unlimited rule and impose presidential term limits and Article 85 to increase Presidential accountability to other branches of government—the reforms will not truly level the playing field for multi-party politics. In addition, Article 82 should be amended to require the election of a vice president along with the president, ending a situation of 24 years in which Mubarak refused to appoint a vice president.

7.8 The current skepticism among opposition groups in Cairo regarding Mubarak's latest announcement is due in large measure to the conviction that as long as Emergency Laws are in effect, and the state controls all electronic and print media, true contestation in Egyptian politics will remain a mirage.

7.9 The recent incarceration of the opposition party leader, Ayman Nour, and thousands of others who are held purely based on their peaceful exercise of political rights must be ended, and further harassment of this kind must cease.

7.10 The US should make it clear that it will henceforth tie its military and economic aid for Egypt to a clearly-stated timetable for political reforms as outlined above.